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Search for the 'Old Country' Enriches Life in the New

Larry Oakes

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Larry Oakes[*]

This is the story of my yearlong search for my family and our history, here and in Sweden. With interest in genealogy at an all-time high, I'm sure my experience is not unique. But the millions who haven't tried should know that wondrous things can happen when you go digging for your roots. Here's what happened to me.

When I came kicking and screaming into this world in 1960, my parents named me Lawrence Victor Oakes, same as my dad, same as his dad.

I was still little when Dad told me the story of our name. Lawrence came from Grandpa, who died when I was 3. Victor came from Great-Grandpa, who died in the 1940s.

And Oakes was picked by Victor after he "got off the boat from the old country," Dad said. Until then Victor's last name was Ek, which is Swedish for "oak."

That's when I first became aware of that other world—the "old country." That's what my grandma called it, too. She came from Finland when she was little. But she didn't talk about it much, and when she did, she often called Finland "the old country," as if she'd forgotten the name or didn't want to say it out loud.

I decided it was a big deal to leave the old country. You even got a new name. When Victor died, his oldest son, Ernest, supplied the information for the death certificate. For birthplace, it just says "Sweden." For parents' names, it says "No record."

Family memory fades

I grew up, and I didn't think about the old country for years at a time. Once someone asked me what part of Sweden my people came from. I didn't know. I pictured a pastoral island. I imagined ancestors fishing with nets or plowing behind oxen. I never dreamed that I could know their names. I never dreamed their descendants might be wondering about me.

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THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting:

CERTIFICATE No. 5345

Whereas Victor Oak of Bayfield County Wisconsin has deposited in the GENERAL LAND OFFICE of the United States a CERTIFICATE OF THE REGISTER OF THE LAND OFFICE at Ashland Wisconsin whereby it appears that Full Payment has been made by the said Victor Oak according to the provisions of the Act of Congress of the 24th of April, 1820, entitled "An Act making further provision for the sale of the Public Lands," and the acts supplemental thereto, for the South half of the North West quarter and the South half of the North East quarter of Section fourteen in Town. ship forty eight North of Range nine West of the fourth Principal Meridian in Wisconsin containing One hundred and sixty acres

according to the OFFICIAL PLAT of the Survey of the said lands, returned to the GENERAL LAND OFFICE by the SURVEYOR GENERAL, which said Tract has been purchased by the said Victor Oak

Now know ye, That the United States of America, in consideration of the premises, and in conformity with the several Acts of Congress in such case made and provided, Have given and granted, and by these presents Do give and grant, unto the said Victor Oak and to his heirs, the said Tract above described; To have and to hold the same, together with all the rights, privileges, immunities, and appurtenances, of whatsoever nature, thereunto belonging, unto the said Victor Oak and to his heirs and assigns forever.

In testimony whereof, I, Benjamin Harrison, President of the United States of America, have caused these letters to be made Patent, and the seal of the GENERAL LAND OFFICE to be hereunto affixed.

GIVEN under my hand, at the CITY OF WASHINGTON, the twenty fifth day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ninety two, and of the Independence of the United States the one hundred and sixteenth

By the President: Benjamin Harrison

By S. Mayfield Clerk

D C Roberts Recording Officer

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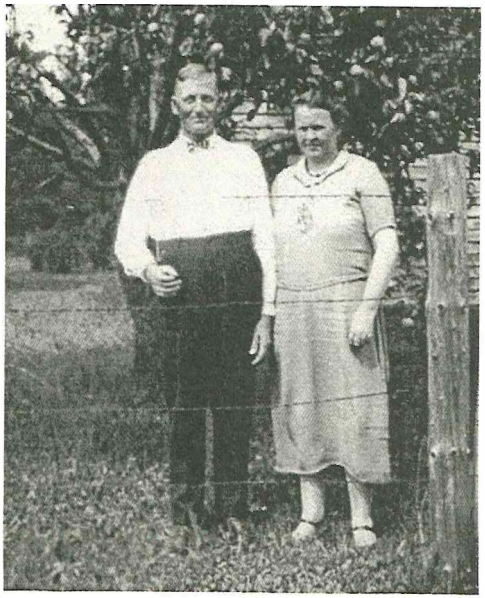
A land patent granted to Victor Oak by the U.S. Government, on a homestead in Oulu, Wisconsin. Such records helped piece together Victor's first years in the U.S.



Victor and Jennie Oakes ca. late 1910s or early 1920s.

My dad had already told me all he knew. If Victor left any written record of life in the old country, it was lost. We had no pictures. Only one story from Victor's early life had passed through the seine of time and tight lips.

Victor apparently hadn't come alone; a brother was with him. They were hunting deer with miners' headlamps before the turn of the century. Someone shot toward them from down a trail or across a field. The brother was hit in the head and died. The story survived; the brother's name didn't.

As a kid I used the story to impress my friends. But that was a story from Wisconsin, not Sweden.

I had no Sweden stories. It was as though Victor had so forcefully pushed the old country out of his mind that the momentum was still carrying it away from mine.

But not without resistance.

I know now that the old country has a pull—and maybe not just on the people who left, but the people down the bloodline. It waits until you're ready, then it beckons.

Maybe it's the gravity of family, tugging the heart like the moon tugs the ocean. With me it struck like a northern pike hits a Dardevle lure, on a hot Sunday last August. My dad had asked me to come with him on a drive. It was a quick trip, just a few hours. But for me, just like for Victor, one trip changed a lot. We drove to Oulu Township, a half-hour east of Superior, Wis.

There, in the 1890s, on pretty rolling hills just south of Lake Superior, immigrant settlers staked some of the last claims filed under the U.S. Homestead Act. One was a Swede named Gustafson, who carved a "free" farm out of towering pines with his wife and two daughters.

We knew that much. And we knew daughter Jennie Gustafson married Victor, who was a foreman on a railroad crew in nearby Brule, Wis. She was my great-grandma. Dad remembered stories his dad told about visiting the farm as a boy—about walking 8 miles to get there from a railroad stop called Muskeg, about shooting grouse with black-powder shells that made a cloud of smoke.

Dad had never been there. Other than Jennie, we didn't even know the Gustafsons' first names. We searched three rural graveyards with no luck before someone told us to go see Ernest Rantala, one of Oulu's oldest people.

He couldn't tell us where the Gustafsons rested, but he knew the farm where they'd lived and worked. "House is still there," Rantala said. "A whole big family is living in it."

Touching the past

A few minutes later we were standing in the solid two-story house my great-great-grandparents built to replace the log cabin they started in. The newest owners, Gary and Dorothy Taylor, took us down to the basement and showed us the hand-hewn floor joists. I saw the adz marks.

"My great-great-grandfather made these," I thought. "His hands touched the same wood I'm touching 100 years later."

The Taylors took a picture of my dad and me, out front, where some big trees shaded the place. Leaning against one, I felt something that's hard to explain. It was a peaceful, together feeling, as though something that was rattling loose inside me had snapped into its socket.

Dad seemed to feel it, too. Back on the highway we chattered like a couple of magpies, wondering about the Gustafsons and about Victor. Why did they move halfway around the world? What was life like for them? Why didn't they pass on stories or write anything down? How did Victor and Jennie meet?

Things hadn't always been easy with me and my dad. Some—some might call them "issues"—had come between us, and for a while the history of the rock-faced Oakeses in our family album was the last thing I'd wanted to know.

Time had done what it usually does, and we were better. But that day in Oulu Township put us square, the way we hadn't been in a long time. And suddenly I wanted more—more information, more connectedness. More peace.

Maybe the old man knew what he was doing.

Since then I've gone stone by stone through a couple of dozen graveyards. I've written about a hundred letters. I've haunted a half-dozen courthouses. Two of my file drawers are now the province of genealogy, my new hobby, my labor of love.

I've learned names. I've copied records documenting births and weddings and deeds and deaths. I've discovered shirttail relations, including Marvel Priem, Grandpa Larry's last surviving cousin. She's 88 and nearly blind, but with her steel-trap mind she can see back 80 years. And she's a good storyteller. Under the spell of her words, long-dead relatives come to life and dance. I got her on tape.

Until I started looking backward, I never even knew who she was. I found her in an apartment building six blocks from my house in Duluth.

I make two copies of every discovery. I send one to my mom and dad in northern Minnesota and another to my brother in Ohio.

Each discovery is like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece makes the picture clearer. It's a picture of my family. Not every part is pretty. But I can't stop turning over the pieces.

Carl Anton Gustafson and Hulda Gustafson—land records and death certificates finally yielded their first names—are buried side-by-side in a little cemetery next to Oulu's Swedish Baptist Church, where they were founding members.

Dad and I couldn't find them that day because the graves are unmarked. But a farm widow, Helen Kallinen, knelt with me in a sunbeam on her living-room floor and showed me their names and plot numbers in the brittle old cemetery book.

"The children should have given them a marker," said Dad, disgustedly, when I told him. But he thanked me for finding out. "Keep going," he said. "You're doing good."

Crossing the ocean

Most Americans can learn only so much family history from America. The trail stops at an ocean; on the other side is the old country.

In Minneapolis I walked out of the American Swedish Institute with $150 worth of books on immigration, history, geography and genealogy.

I learned that one out of five Swedes—about 1.2 million in all—left their country for America between 1840 and 1930, part of the 35-million-person wave that marked the greatest migration in human history.

Industrialization and a population boom were eating up jobs and land in Europe. Swedish society had classes, with unequal restrictions on such things as land ownership and voting. And you asked for trouble if you tried to form any church other than Lutheran, the state religion and keeper of records. America's freedoms and bounty stood in stark contrast.

But the exodus tore families apart. Some kept in touch and even crossed the ocean again to visit. Most couldn't afford it. Some stopped writing, as if the old country had sunk into the sea behind them.

One slim volume told me that a wealth of information can be unearthed in Sweden's old parish records, once you know your ancestors' hometowns.

Finding my family's hometowns was easier said than done. Death certificates said only "Sweden." Same with the five-line obituaries I found in newspapers from the period. Ditto the U.S. Census records I examined on microfilm at the National Archives branch in Chicago, where I stopped while working on a story.

Victor's and Jennie's marriage license application, still on file after 100 years in the Douglas County (Wis.) courthouse, didn't have hometowns, either. But it had names of parents, penned in what appeared to be Victor's hand. Victor identified his as Gustaf and Anna Ek, formerly Anna Holmström.

Seeing those names, I felt that little click again, a warm little surge of excitement and relief. It happens every time I uncover another generation, every time I rescue more names and birthdates from smothered silence.

I went to Bell Brothers, the Duluth funeral home that buried several of my ancestors. Amazingly, they retained files showing everything from what time the hearse was called out to which songs were sung at the funerals.

Carl Anton Gustafson's file listed his hometown: Godegård, a farm community in the region of Östergötland.

Bell Brothers also had Victor's information: His birthplace line just said "Sweden." My namesake wasn't sharing his past easily.

The link was in a drawer

A few months later I was visiting a 95-year-old relative, who shall remain nameless because she doesn't like people to know her age. She had some old pictures in a drawer. And beneath them was the mother lode: important papers of Victor's, including original citizenship papers listing him as Victor Oak. And lo and behold, there was a single handwritten sheet that listed the birthplaces of Victor, Jennie and their four kids. It said Victor came from a town called Sala.

Here's the part of my story that is almost magic.

I went home that night and got on the Internet. I typed "Sala Sweden" into a search engine. It was the password that opened the secret door. Within seconds I was looking at the Web site for my great-grandfather's hometown.

It was all in Swedish, but it had an inviting picture of a little building, a stream and a bridge. And at the bottom of the page was an "e-post" icon. I clicked on it and wrote:

> "Dear Sir or Madame: Please forgive that I write only English. I am an American named Larry Oakes. My great-grandfather was Victor Ek, who was born in Sala on May 8, 1868, or 1869. His father was Gustaf Ek.... "
>
> Victor Ek left Sweden in the 1880s, and went to America, where he changed his name to Oak, and, later, Oakes. I know nothing of my family who remained in Sweden, but I am eager to learn of them and meet my relatives."

I asked that my e-mail be forwarded to anyone who might be able to help, and gave my address. I paused. I had no evidence that Victor ever wrote home. It might have been 110 years since an Ek in the New World communicated with an Ek in the old.

I hit the send icon. I half-expected thunder. Instead, my screen silently said, "Your mail has been sent."

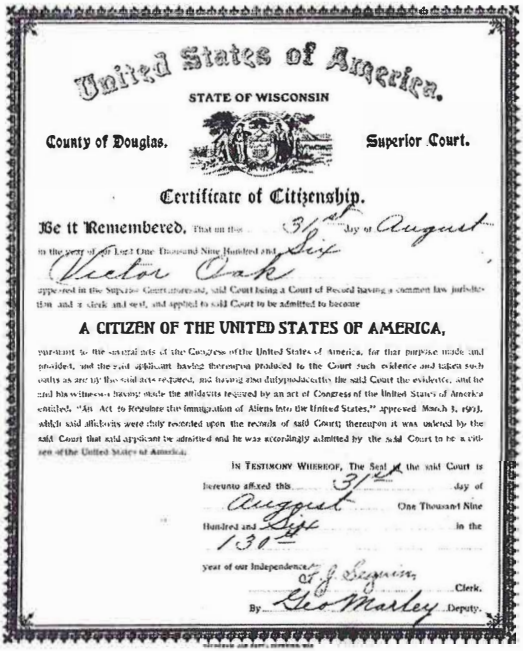
A full-court shot

Let's face it. Those wishes we make on stars seldom bring the results we dream of. I knew my attempt to find relatives at the end of a trail that had grown cold for 110 years was nothing more than a prayer, a full-court shot at the buzzer. But I saw a kid sink one of those shots during a big game back in high school. Hopes and basketballs can't help but soar. And once in a blue moon, your craziest wish is God's command.

A large envelope was waiting in my mailbox three weeks later, a drizzly day in March. I saw the strange stamps and "U.S.A." on the front and did one of those little catch breaths. Then I saw the name on the return address: Ihrene Ek.

I sat down and just looked at it for a while. A tear or two rimmed my eyes as I carefully tore open the flap and began to read:

Victor Oakes shortly after arriving in the United States in 1888.



United States of America.

STATE OF WISCONSIN

County of Douglas. Superior Court.

Certificate of Citizenship.

Be it Remembered, That on this 31st day of August

in the year of our Lord One Thousand Nine Hundred and Six

Victor Oak

appeared in the Superior Court aforesaid, said Court being a Court of Record having a common law jurisdiction and a clerk and seal, and applied to said Court to be admitted to become

A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

pursuant to the statutes of the Congress of the United States of America, for that purpose made and provided, and the said applicant having thereupon produced to the Court such evidence and taken such oaths as are by the said acts required, and having also duly produced to the said Court the evidence, and the said his witnesses having made the affidavits required by an act of Congress of the United States of America entitled, "An Act to Regulate the Immigration of Aliens into the United States," approved March 3, 1903, which said affidavits were duly recorded upon the records of said Court; thereupon it was ordered by the said Court that said applicant be admitted and he was accordingly admitted by the said Court to be a citizen of the United States of America.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, The Seal of the said Court is hereunto affixed this 31st day of August One Thousand Nine Hundred and Six in the 130th year of our Independence.

C. J. Sayrin Clerk.

By Geo. Marley Deputy.

Certificate of Citizenship issued to Victor Oak that was recently found in a drawer of documents in a relative's home.

"Dear Relative," it said in English. "I was born in Sala 1957. I work as an X-ray nurse in Avesta hospital 35 km from Sala. I live in a little village between those cities. I have two children.

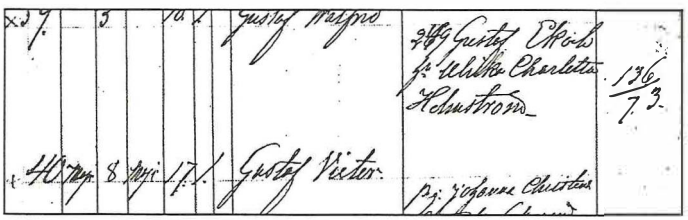
"My greatest interest is family genealogy, so you can imagine my surprise when a woman from Sala called me and told me about your letter. I have some information about your [our] relatives...."

The letter went on for six pages, both sides. Victor's silence was shattering all over my kitchen floor. Here's what she told me: The Eks in Sala go back at least to 1799, the year Victor's grandfather, Anders Ek, was born. Anders was Ihrene's great-great-great-grandfather, and mine. He had children with two women, forming two branches of Eks in Sala. I came from one branch, Ihrene from the other.

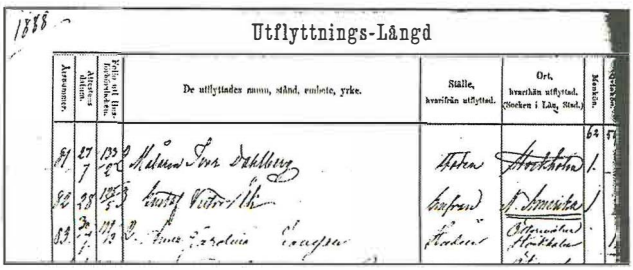
Victor's dad and grandfather, like most men in Sala from the 1500s through the 1800s, worked underground in the town's silver mine, now a major tourist attraction in the town of 12,000.

Not fishermen, I thought. Not farmers. Silver miners.

Turns out Victor changed not only his last name but his first; he was born Gustaf Victor Ek, one of five children. His older brother—it must be the one who was shot—was Carl Johan Ek. Ihrene said she'd seen records that showed he moved to North America in 1887, one year before Victor.



Gustaf Victor Ek was born 8 May 1868, the son of Gustaf Ek and Ulrika Charlotta Holmström. Birth and Christening Record (Födelse- och Doplängd), *Sala Stads Parish (Väst.) 1868, No. 40.*



Gustaf Victor Ek's moving out record (Utflyttningslängd), *Sala Stads Parish (Väst.), 1888, No. 82.*

Victor was brought up in a cottage in Sjöbo, a lakeside village on the outskirts of Sala. Ihrene said that after getting my e-mail she visited the cottage, which is still there and still being used.

"I will stop here but you will hear from me again. I have often been thinking of this 'Oak-branch over there,' how their lives became and so on. So when I heard of your letter, it was like a wish that came true. I send you many greetings and I really look forward to an answer."

Boy, did she get one.

I sent her a long letter with a detailed history of the American "Oak branch" as best I knew it. I enclosed copies of Victor's important papers. I included pictures of our families—Victor's, his kids', my dad's, mine. I asked her all kinds of questions. I thanked her.

A sudden river of letters

Ihrene sent me pictures of her husband and children, her ancestors and a special treasure: a picture of the cottage where Victor was born, with his brother Klas and a housekeeper in front.

Victor Ek was born in this cottage in Sjöbo, Sweden, in 1868. Standing in front are Victor's brother, Klas Ek, and the housekeeper, Stina Charlotta Norström.

In June, Ihrene sent a card with little blue flowers pressed inside. "In Springtime the ground is covered with these," she wrote.

I've also been getting genealogy reports from Maj-Britt Johansson, a retired nurse who frequents Sala City Hall and was the one who passed my e-mail to Ihrene, whom she knew.

Between those two and a professional genealogist from Uppsala whom I hired via e-mail, I now have history on the Sala ancestors dating back to 1717, complete with copies of death certificates, wills, fascinating inventories of meager estates ("one cow, two water buckets, one kettle...") and entries about the Eks from the invaluable annual household examination reports kept for centuries by every parish in Sweden.

Meanwhile, I e-mailed the regional archive in Östergötland, which for a fee chronicled and sent the history of the Godegård branch of the family back to 1794, although I have yet to find any of their Swedish descendants.

I've started following other family branches, including my mom's and my wife's, with roots in Norway and Finland.

And I still have some loose ends to tie off. My dad, my brother and I plan to buy a stone to finally mark the graves of Carl and Hulda Gustafson. Besides the usual names and dates, I'd like it to say, "Swedish Immigrants; Oulu Pioneers."

I'd like to think that my family won't lose track of them again.

The resting place of Victor's fallen brother, Carl Johan Ek, still eludes me. I haven't found his death certificate, either. But I haven't given up. Old newspapers might have the tragic story.

Ihrene and Maj-Britt have traced Victor's sister, Hilda Augusta, and her husband to the town of Norrköping in 1945. They had two daughters, who would probably be dead by now. If those daughters had children, I have no doubt that Ihrene and Maj-Britt will find them. Maybe they have letters Victor sent from America. Maybe we will finally hear in Victor's words the answers to some of our questions.

My wife, a bemused witness to my obsession this past year, said: "I guess there's no need for us to discuss where we're going on our next trip." With help from a Berlitz tape, we have already learned to say, "I would like a glass of red wine, please."

"We have to go," said my brother.

"It's inevitable," said Dad.

It's remarkable, us talking this way. Never in the 20 years since we kids grew up has anyone in our family suggested that we take a vacation together, let alone to Europe.

But I believe we'll do it, and soon. The pull of the old country is strong on us now, and we have a lot of catching up to do.

I'd like to schedule our flight for nighttime, during a full moon. That way we can watch it sparkle on the ocean that carried our family to the New World so long ago.

Suspended between the lift of wings and the pull of ancient earth, we'll sail on moonbeams to our ancestral home.